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A Perspective for Role Theory

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The use of the concept of role as the meeting point of theories of culture and theories of personality is examined and found to be caught in a double theoretical pressure. While serving to unite some of the generality of cultural theories with some of the specificity of personality theories, the concept of role is alternately stretched and constricted, resulting in a situation of theoretical ambiguity. This is due to the lack of a perspective which would strengthen the generalizing power of the concept of role without eliminating any of its specific reference. The following article attempts to outline such a perspective.

Are similar patterns of thought the result of individual patterns of learning or do they derive from a common cultural origin? This question mirrors the problem of individualism-collectivism and so reaches into the heart of sociology. Between individualistic theories of personality and syncretic theories of culture, sociology has lately witnessed an increasing compromise via the concept of role.

The theoretical treatment of role behavior has progressed far beyond the anecdotal treatment which characterized the works of pioneers in this field. The works of Linton, Newcomb, Mead, and others too numerous to mention has led to more recent studies—for example, the work of Parsons and Shils, and more recently the work of Sarbin.[1] However, the accumulation of a wealth of empirical studies has generated the need for a more comprehensive theory.

The following study attempts to focus on one of the possible perspectives which might conceivably serve this need. It is the author's thesis that there is a tension between the polar opposites of analysis and synthesis, which gives rise alternately to periods of nominalism and of syncretism in the formulation of theories. Thus, despite an increasing adoption of the General Theory of Action, and of the wider use of the psychoanalytic point of view, the formulation of a role theory seems at present to suffer from a nominalistic approach.

What is advocated is a new approach to the formulation of role theory, since it no longer seems fruitful to add, subtract, multiply or divide "factors" of role, yet some sort of methodology for generalizing

* This article is a slightly revised version of a paper delivered at the annual convention of the American Catholic Sociological Soicety in August, 1959.

[1] T. R. Sarbin, "Role Theory," *Handbook of Social Psychology*, G. Lindzey (ed.), Cambridge, Mass.: Addison Wesley Co., 1954, Vol. I, pp. 223-258.

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the myriad aspects of role theory needs to be developed and tested. It is assumed throughout the following discussion that all human action is a form of expression of meaningful relation, i.e., of communication. The study forms a small part of the general problem of the relation of knowledge, behavior and history.

MANNHEIM AND HEGEL ON 'MEDIATION'

In his *Essays on the Sociology of Culture*,[2] Karl Mannheim again displays that peculiar form of Hegelianism which has come to be associated with his thinking. Mannheim says that Hegel made a lasting contribution to scientific methodology when he pointed out that to observe an object is to grasp it in its mediate character.[3] It is this concept of mediation which needs clarification with reference to roles.

The problem as Mannheim seems to define it is this: we need some sort of frame of reference which will unify our observations on role communication, yet that frame of reference cannot dictate in advance what role communication is. On the other hand we must recognize that isolated acts of observation cannot lead to a unified comprehension. It is Mannheim's contention that this gap can be bridged by Hegel's concept of mediation. Simply stated, mediation means that we must include what we know of the surrounding circumstances in our act of observation, yet this inclusion must be provisional and tentative. For example, if one is making a study of Renaissance art, one does not merely look at the manifest content of the paintings and sculpture. It is necessary to investigate which of the Medicis was the patron for the particular work, what the patron's wishes were with respect to the work, how well the artist was able to translate his understanding of what was expected of him into the terms of his creative action, etc. Merely to look at the paintings is to perceive them immediately, whereas a mediate perception would provisionally include a hunch as to the artist's motives, both those of which he was aware and those of which he was not. The investigation must look into the meaning of the work not only in terms of itself but in terms of who the artist was, to and for whom he was painting, etc.—in other words the group setting for his entire act of communication which includes both its conscious and unconscious qualities.

This tells us that there is another dimension to what Mannheim calls a design for relevance, because, although he tells us that the unconscious plays a part in communication,[4] he nowhere hints at the method we

[2] K. Mannheim, *Essays On The Sociology of Culture*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1956.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 40.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 55.

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should use to grasp this aspect of the communication. Therefore to Mannheim's protocol of mediate observation, it is necessary to hypothetically append the psychoanalytic dimension.

What follows is a brief outline of the theory of role communication as it might appear if the Freudian and Hegelian views were compenetrated.

FREUDIAN-HEGELIAN VIEWPOINT

The structure of personality[5] is triune, involving the proliferation of the Id into a contact with reality mediated by the Ego, and a proliferation of the Ego into a social relation with itself called Superego. The Id is original, and might be conceptualized as the entire organism on a protopsychological level of operation. Id seeks the reduction of tension, i.e., it operates on the principle of pleasure. It has at its disposal the mechanism of reflex action, which discharges tension, and the primary process, whereby it imagines in images the tension reduction it seeks. Id is intraorganismic; it is not conscious of any reality beyond the geography of the skin. Ego is Id's mediation with extraorganismic reality. It operates by suspending (negating) the primary process, which suspension (or negation) is called the secondary process. Since Id cannot remain indefinitely satisfied with images, Ego tests reality to see whether a more concrete fulfillment can be found extraorganismically. Ego may be conceptualized as Id's organized relation to reality.

Superego, like Id, is non-rational, and like Ego, negates Id. It is the locus of society's attitudes toward Id, simultaneously tyrannical and perfectionistic since both characteristics are the universalization of anti-Id attitudes.

The dynamics of personality involve the postulate of constant growth, whose resultant tension makes the organism uncomfortable. Id is there conservative, and its need to be tension-free creates the wish for tension's absence. This wish is a primordial production of the organism which may also be conceptualized as instinct, i.e., the need for the absence of tension. Thus the instinct for life and the satisfaction of life needs, e.g., hunger, thirst, sex, are broadly conceived as proliferations of libido, the life instinct. Correlatively, the need for the negation of tension brought about by the impossibility of simultaneously gratifying each and every impulse of each life need may be conceptualized as the death need, called thanatos. The needs of life and the needs of death, which are usually seen as two different sets of needs, are here portrayed

[5] In the following I have relied heavily on C. S. Hall and G. Lindzey, *Theories of Personality*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1957; and on C. S. Hall and G. Lindzey, "Psychoanalytic Theory and its Applications in the Social Sciences," in G. Lindzey, *op. cit.*, pp. 143-180.

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as coprincipial, such that the presence of any single need at least involves the negation of its counterpart. More specifically, the reality of any particular need at least involves the possibility (the not-yet reality) of its own continuation. In relating to its own future, the organism is faced with its not-yet aspect, its negation, which when achieved (synthesized) still involves the possibility of further syntheses. Thus the limitation of Id is its mediation by Ego; the limitation of Ego is its negation by Superego; the limitation of life is death.

The structure and dynamics of personality can be conceptualized as if they were separate and distinct, but of course such a separation is abstract, designed only to facilitate conceptualization. Actually, the dynamics of personality are the temporal dimension of its structure. For example, we may call a certain paint a mixture of red and yellow pigments, yet we see that the wall itself is orange. Basically then, personality might be defined as a dialectical synthesis of wants and limits in a human organism thrice mediated in its relation to the world of culture. Or, to put the matter in different terms, the wants of the organism must endure specific limitations in order to achieve any gratification. Gratification is the synthesis of a want (thesis) and a limit (antithesis) such that the maturation of the organism is a growing and developing process, not merely a passage through successive stages. We refer to an achieved stage as mediated. The essential point to be noted is this: the process philosophy of Hegel is particularly fruitful for an exposition of the relations of Id, Ego, and Superego, and their mutual meditations in a process tending toward mature personality. Growth means synthesis, which necessarily involves negation. Personality becomes what it is not-yet.

The fusion of Hegel and Freud therefore cannot be accomplished by a facile listing of thesis-antithesis-synthesis in one column and Id-Ego-Superego in the next column. The point of confluence lies somewhat deeper. Both Hegel and Freud viewed man developmentally, and their views represent what sociologists would call a genetic perspective, in which a structure to be observed is construed as the static aspect of a dynamic process. It is the difference between the plot and the drama, where the full comprehension of the meaning of any one scene involves the whole play. To put the matter in Hegel's terms, we must mediate the scene by the play; to put it in Freudian terms, the child is the father of the man. The common insight is the recognition of process, i.e., the realization that a particular aspect of social life must be seen in its temporal context. Since the whole gives meaning to the parts, it is impossible to summate the whole from the parts. To say that the whole precedes the parts misses the point: just as the hypothesis must provisionally precede the data, so the play must be provisionally conceived in its entirety before a particular scene can be written.

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The same point could be made by reference to the relativity theory of modern physics, in which time and space are not treated as separate and distinct, but as related dimensions of a continuum. The concept of continuum thus carries an inescapably temporal connotation. Mannheim discusses at length the fact that certain role behavior is irrelevant to the social process under consideration, which leads him to state that the continuity of history depends on the relevance of constituent role action. Correlatively, historical discontinuity is the outcome of irrelevant action.

ROLE, PERSONALITY, CULTURE

The utilization of the Freudian-Hegelian viewpoint in role communication investigations involves the questions, "What is the relation between role and personality; is it part-whole; is role the dynamic aspect of personality structure; is personality the structural basis of dynamic roles?" Such questions form the basis of contemporary research into role theory.[6] Sometimes we find the term "incarnation" used[7] to suggest that role is the embodiment of the whole personality in a particular time-space, a usage which becomes particularly apropos in a Hegelian perspective. Sometimes we find the term "expression" employed[8] to suggest that role is one of the functional adjustments which personality designs to participate in social reality. This too is a valuable conceptualization. But the concept of mediation goes beyond these coinages to the heart of the problem. From the viewpoint of mediation, role is the mediation of personality to the world of culture, such that a growing continuity of roles makes for increasing participation in culture.

The concept of mediation therefore focuses on a little-studied aspect of role theory; it bids us look at the continuity behind certain roles; it suggests that a whole series of roles might be necessary before a particular role can be acted out. It thus points the way beyond theories of socialization which arithmetically summate and geometrically "factor" roles, since it focuses on their temporal continuity. Much could be learned about roles if longitudinal studies mapped out the successive roles a particular personality expresses, with chronology serving as the initial guide to interrelation. Usually the approach of the social psychologist is to map out the personality first and then seek its role-incarnations. The opposite procedure of investigating the role-continuity behind a contiguous succession of roles might reveal much not only about the personality but about role and socialization as well.

[6] Sarbin, *op. cit., infra.*

[7] Mannheim, *op. cit.*

[8] D. J. Levinson, "Role, Personality, and Social Structure in the Organizational Setting," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology,* 58 (March, 1959). Since 1959 Levinson has published extensively in this area.

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It remains to be pointed out that in each role there corresponds a dimension which Freudian theory maps out in the personality. Thus to the Id-dimension of personality there corresponds a want-dimension in the role; to the Superego-dimension of personality there corresponds a limit-dimension in the role; to the Ego-dimension of personality there corresponds a mediator-dimension in the role. What seems to be missing in the Parsonian framework is just this synthetic or unified center of role action, although this is certainly not the first time a certain nominalism in the Parsonian scheme has been pointed out.

By reference to the concept of mediation, we can now conceive of role action not merely as the sum or product of an ever-increasing number of "factors," but as the synthesized individuality which forms the center of meaningful communication. In short, the dimensions of role have a mediated unity which the "factor" point of view can only nominalize.

The use of the word dimension bears some clarification. Like the height, width, and breadth of a blackboard, we can single out one dimension for discussion, but we must parenthetically keep in mind that dimensions are not real factors, things, entities. Similarly, the want-dimension or the limit-dimension of role do not exist as factors, nor as aspects; the dimensions of role are the "moments" of role individuality. It thus becomes incorrect to say that a role has a particular configuration *because* there was a need which it filled; rather we should say that the need or want-dimension as negated by the limit-dimension accounts for the final shape the role action assumes. It is the mediator-dimension of role as the final synthesis of its relations to which we must direct our attention, not to role's reified aspects.

BEYOND INDIVIDUALISM-COLLECTIVISM

The temptation to submit to the intramural illusion wells up whenever we wish to formulate a comprehensive unity. Therefore it must be recalled that the very basis of the notion of role is the idea of reciprocity, such that the group setting in which role action occurs imparts shape to the dimensions of role. The whole group shapes the role-dimensions no less than every whole shapes its parts.

Nevertheless, just as the hypothesis gives only a provisional unity to the data, so the group gives only provisional unity to the role. In short, no system of determinism, whether Durkheimian, Marxian, Freudian, or Hegelian, can be put forward at this stage of the game. The group is neither the product of the roles, nor are roles the mere derivatives of groups. Both views are over-simplifications of social process since both are true but neither is complete. No doubt the group is the setting of role actions; certainly the role action shapes the group; but the relation

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of role to group is again not the relation of part-whole, nor of equal parts or equal wholes. Roles and groups are not two sets of items; they are co-principial terms, so that separation of them is as false as separating the width from the length of a blackboard.

Proponents of a conservative nominalism will try to remind us here that great men impress the stamp of their personalities on groups more than groups influence their personalities. This is undeniably true, but the conclusion of sociological individualism does not follow. As Mannheim points out,[9] great men are not less socialized but more. Thus, in Hegelian language, the great man has so mediated his relation to the group that he has synthesized its structure within himself and then gone on to transcend it.

The relation of role and group resembles the relation of personality and role in that both can be described from the point of view of mediation. Just as role is the personality's mediation to the group, the group is role's mediation to culture. That is to say, culture and personality are related via the mediation of role. Just as role incarnates personality, group incarnates culture.

In other words, the dimensions of want and limit as dialectical opposites can be used to characterize not only role activity but are equally applicable to group and cultural action, whether we are concerned with small groups such as families or large collectivities such as the state, or even whole communities. It thus becomes possible to avoid discussion of these sociological objects as simple summations or products of smaller groups. A social organism is the dialectical synthesis of opposite moments. The work of Sturzo[10] describes the organizational and mystical dimensions of an organization, a condition he calls diarchy. In his work, it is not possible to view a social reality as the sum or product of forces, but as the dialectical reconciliation of opposing currents of consciousness, which can be analyzed but not separated.[11]

Thus, analysis of sociological objects into opposing currents of want and limit affords an excellent diagnostic device for social pathologists, since similar characteristics can be noted in objects which differ in other ways but which resemble each other as far as wants and limits are concerned. For example, a rigidly hierarchized institution resembles the personality of a military dictator in that both are concerned primarily with the limitation of their constitutive roles, rather than with the fulfillment of the needs requisite for a richer cultural participation.

[9] Mannheim, *op. cit.*

[10] L. Sturzo, *Inner Laws of Society*, trans. by B. B. Carter, New York: P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1944.

[11] V. J. Gioscia, "The Relation of Theory and Method in the Sociological Works of Don Luigi Sturzo," unpublished M.A. Dissertation, Fordham University, 1957.

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Usually, Marxists will have nothing to do either with Hegel, whom they castigate as a decadent idealist, or with Freud, whom they dismiss as a Viennese romantic. Does a Freudian-Hegelian viewpoint necessarily obviate a Marxian Sociology? It seems not, precisely because the question of motive becomes central wherever Freudian theory is used. Rather than state that economic determinism must precede all role analysis, the viewpoint proposed here points out that economic motivation must be sought in the observation of role action. Instead of asking whether mind is the superstructure erected on an ineradicable economic base, we should attempt empirically to discern whether economic motivation does in fact play the very primary function assigned to it in Marxian theory. In other words, rather than espouse a Marxian teleology of history on philosophical grounds, the sociologist must operationalize economic needs so that they become subject to empirical verification. Mannheim is in agreement with the need to operationalize Marxian theory, but does the view proposed here reduce the whole question to unconscious motivation? Not at all, although it insists that the question of the unconscious quality of motivation not be excluded. Again the contraposition of collectivism-individualism is a false polarizaton of the issue. We are concerned with role action, and we wish to verify whether in fact we can discern in the want-dimension of role-activity a primacy of economic motivation, whether in fact group activity necessarily puts economic activity first. The hypothesis of Marxism has not been tested in this form, so that, from a sociological point of view, it is just as unempirical to accept it as to reject it.

SUMMARY

This study has attempted to formulate a perspective for role theory, which seems at present to be struggling for an overview. Several reasons account for the attempt to advocate a Freudian-Hegelian point of view to meet this need. To recapitulate briefly, these reasons are as follows: first, Mannheim's last essays led him to hypothesize that a recreated Hegelianism might become the central issue in the Sociology of Culture, which he equates with the Sociology of Mind; second, although he points out that the unconscious quality of motivation plays a large part in shaping role-communication, Mannheim does not specify a methodological approach to that dimension; thirdly, the psychoanalytic method not only meets the requirements which Mannheim set, that is, it deals with the unconscious, and it can be utilized to portray more empirically the Hegelian theory of mediation, but it also serves to unite two of the perspectives which current sociology uses, i.e., role theory and psychoanalytic theory.

The suggestion to adopt a Freudian-Hegelian perspective should not

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be interpreted to mean that the perspective here outlined is the only possible formulation. The foregoing represents the results of research which the author has accomplished to date on the topic. The actual empirical tests to which the perspective is being put are promising but incomplete as of this writing.

It should be noted that the perspective does not explicitly refer to the feeling-dimension or emotional aspect of role behavior. This must be deferred to a separate treatment.

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